

Socio - Political Views of Vivekananda

January 12, 2013 marked Swami Vivekananda's one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary. We remember that outstanding personality on this occasion by reproducing some excerpts from Binoy K. Roy's Socio-Political Views of Vivekananda (published by People's Publishing House, New Delhi in November 1970).

-by **BINOY K. ROY**

At the crossroads of two epoch-making centuries, when restless Europe was convulsing, on the one hand, under the far-flung tentacles of the greedy, shameless imperialists who were secretly conspiring to drag the world into a bloodbath for the sake of redividing their spheres of influence, colonies, markets, etc. and on the other hand, as a result of the nefarious designs of the imperialists, the progressive people—the thinking intelligentsia, the working class and their allies—were preparing for a showdown with the existing masters of the society, when the thinking people of India were searching for the correct path which the country should follow in social, political and other matters, Vivekananda appeared like a meteor and within a short period of less than a decade of his public life not only endeared himself to millions of his countrymen and thousands of his admirers and followers in Europe and America, not only dispelled the century-old slanderous notions about India and Indians spread carefully and constantly by the imperialists and their agents in various guises, but made major contributions in many fields of human knowledge which were of far-reaching consequences.

Of these, much has already been said and written by quite competent authorities on the philosophical, religious, philanthropic and mystical aspects of Vivekananda's teachings. About Vivekananda's socio-political views, there are comparatively fewer works and even among these, except one or two, most authors have tried to prove that Vivekananda's sociological views, his plan of national regeneration have been amply realised by the philanthropic organisation of which he was the founder. Some have satisfied themselves with the fact that his works were handbooks of the revolutionaries of early 20th century and the fact that such outstanding revolutionaries as Aurobindo Ghosh and his brother, Barin Ghosh, were directly inspired by Vivekananda and one of the earliest meetings, where the question of forming a revolutionary party and working out its pro-gramme and platform were discussed, was attended by Sister Nivedita, the closest disciple of Swamiji, obviously with his blessings... ..Vivekananda's burning patriotism, his love and sympathy for the toiling millions not only of India but also of America (Negroes especially) and Europe, his scorn and hatred for the parasitic exploiting upper classes of India (the feudal classes mainly) whom he considered to be unnecessary, outdated ornaments of the society, dead souls, "living corpses", his realisation of the role of labour in the construction of the edifice of human civilisation, its loftiness, patriot-ism and transformatory role in society and its power, his conviction that the next phase of human history is going to be guided and led by the toilers, Shudras, with all their Shudraness, his hatred for colonial exploitation and imperialist grabbing of the world coupled with his Vedantic conception of "freedom" of soul, equality of all men and nations, and universal brotherhood—all these helped Vivekananda to travel a long way from the position of a disciple of Rama-krishna... to one of the foremost thinkers of his period who could clearly see the complex machinations of imperialism, could foresee its inevitable downfall, hear the footsteps of the advancing social revolution, which was maturing in the womb of imperialism and with the foresight of a genius could herald the appearance of the new rulers of the new society. As we know, from our experience of history, Vivekananda's prophecy about Shudra Raj was not the empty mystical speculation of a fortune-teller but had a sound basis deeply embedded in the social relations themselves...

Programme of National Regeneration

AFTER his return from a successful tour of the USA and England, Vivekananda toured the whole of India. He received a hero's welcome everywhere. Mass meetings were organised and in every meeting people heard him with rapt attention. During this period he made innumerable speeches and wrote a number of pamphlets—not only on religion, but on different aspects of sociology, on the future of his motherland and the fate of humanity as a whole. His views were taking more and more a political colour. Though his approach to social and political problems was basically of an idealistic nature, his views on them gradually became more and more radical.

The programme for the national regeneration of India, as propounded by Vivekananda, was not formulated all at once, was not given out just in one speech or writing but gradually crystallised and took shape in his speeches, talks and articles...

...In his Madras speech Vivekananda said: "...I have a message for the world which I will deliver without fear, and without care for the future. To the reformers I will point out that I am a greater reformer than any one of them. They want to reform only little bits. I want root and branch reform. Where we differ is in the method... I do not believe in reform; I believe in growth... This wonderful national machine has worked through ages, this wonderful river of national life is flowing before us...Thousands of circumstances are crowding round it, giving it a special impulse, making it dull at one time and quicker at another... Feed the national life with the fuel it wants, but the growth is its own; none can dictate its growth to it."1

Vivekananda was of the opinion that India should be saved by the Indians themselves. The new element in this concept was his refusal to stick to his original position, viz, that India will follow its path of development in isolation from the rest of the world, exclusively by way of rediscovery of its ancient glory and spiritual heritage of ancient India.

"My idea as to the key-note of our national downfall is that we do not mix with other nations—that is the one and sole cause. We never had the opportunity to compare notes. We were Kupa-Mandukas (frogs in a well)."2

In Calcutta, at the civic reception organised in his honour at the residence of Raja Radha Kanta Dev Bahadur of Shobha Bazar, in reply to the address of his friends and admirers, Vivekananda observed:

"One of the great cause of India's misery and downfall has been that she narrowed herself, went into her shell, as the oyster does, and refused to give her jewels and her treasures to the other races of mankind, refused to give the life-giving truth to thirsting nations outside the Aryan fold. That has been the one great cause, that we did not go out, that we did not compare notes with other nations—that has been the one great cause of our downfall, and every one of you knows that that little stir, the little life you see in India, begins from the day when Raja Rammohan Roy broke through the walls of this exclusiveness. Since that day, history in India has taken another turn and now it is growing with accelerated motion. If we have had little rivulets in the past, deluges are coming, and none can resist them. Therefore we must go out, and the secret of life is to give and take. Are we to take always, to sit at the feet of the Westerners to learn everything, even religion? We can learn mechanism from them. We can learn many other things. But we have to teach them something... Therefore we must go out, exchange our spirituality for anything they have to give us; for the marvels of the region of spirit we will exchange the marvels of the region of matter..... There cannot be friendship without equality, and there cannot be equality when

one party is always the teacher and the other party sits always at his feet....If you want to become equal with the Englishman or the American, you will have to teach as well as to learn, and you have plenty yet to teach to the world for centuries to come.”³

The basis of exchange between India and the Western world, according to Vivekananda, was: spirituality from India and material benefits from the West... From his own idealistic conception of the history of India. Vivekananda thought that the basis of national unity in a country like India could only be religion. If by synthesising Vedanta with a Sufi version of Islam we could create or formulate a single, united, synthetic religion, a sort of mother religion which could, at the same time, preserve all the essential characteristics of existing religions of India; if all the religious sects could function freedly (with the “mother religion” uniting them), then, by this act, we could lay a solid foundation of India’s unity.

In all probability, what he had in mind was spiritual unity and not social. It becomes obvious when we refer to his views on religion vs social laws and social reforms. Proceeding from the Vedantic concept that the soul has no sex, creed or caste he writes: “Therefore we agree with those who say, ‘what has religion to do with social reforms? But they must also agree with us when we tell them that religion has no business to formulate social laws... Social laws were created by economic conditions under the sanction of religion. The terrible mistake of religion was to interfere in social matters... True, what we want is that religion should not be a social reformer, but we insist at the same time that religion has no right to become a social law giver. Hands off! Keep yourself to your own bounds and everything would come right.”⁴

A very strong argument in favour of separating the church from the affairs of the state and not allowing the former to interfere with the latter...



VIVEKANANDA dreamed of organising a hundred thousand strong army of educated young men and women who were supposed to educate the masses of people, rouse their consciousness. In fact, this part of the programme took the actual shape of philanthropic, enlightening activity conducted by the Ramakrishna Missin. It is a fact that generations of young revolutionaries of India have taken their inspiration from the teachings of Vivekananda, but, strangely enough, they did not take the course of going to the masses and rousing them. Instead they took the line of armed insurrection to be conducted by small organised groups.

Vivekananda’s influence on the 20th century thinking of India, especially during the early years of this century was very deep and wide-spread. His Vedantic approach to the question of supremacy of soul over body or of the spiritual world over the material world; his teachings on the equality of all men and women, of all nations; his high evaluation of the spiritual treasure we have inherited from ancient India; his search for the Indian line of spiritual, social and political development; his thought about the synthesis of the East and the West in Indian society; his views on untouchability and on many other points were reflected and further developed in the works of outstanding thinkers, social and political leaders of the country.

The search for the path Indian society should follow in social, spiritual and political spheres is still going on along with all its accompanying sufferings, agonies, despair, frustration, hope and fear. In this context it would not be out of place to humbly suggest: let us go back to Vivekananda, assimilate a bit of his fire,

sincerity of purpose, deep love for the downtrodden have-nots, and faith in their future and readiness to accept the unknown new fearlessly.

REFERENCES

1. Vivekananda, The Complete Works, Vol. III, Mayavati, 1950, p. 213.
2. Op. cit., Vol. V, p. 150.
3. Op. cit, Vol. III, pp. 316-18.
4. Op. cit, Vol. IV, p. 358.

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